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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AN ISLAND HOTSPOT OF BIODIVERSITY

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11. SUMMARY: Sri Lanka consists of a land area of 65,610 square kilometers, covering low-lying wetlands, mountainous rainforests, and expansive jungles. Despite its relatively small size, the country possesses a high level of biodiversity and represents a biodiversity hotspot. One feature of Sri Lanka's biodiversity is its number of endemic species. The country's biodiversity has been protected by a blend of culture and legislation, though much more needs to be done to protect endangered species. The main threat to biodiversity is the increasing demand for land for human habitation, agricultural use, and development. END SUMMARY

12. ESTHoff met with key stakeholders in Sri Lanka who focus on biodiversity - contacts in NGOs, universities, and with the government - and noted that 2010 is the United Nations' International Year of Biodiversity. All noted the remarkable nature of the island's biodiversity and the fact that, since 1988, Sri Lanka has been on the list of biodiversity hotspots compiled by Conservation International. Unfortunately, this designation has done little to slow the destruction of habitat and loss of species. Still, despite millennia of human habitation, centuries of ecosystem change with the arrival of Europeans, decades of lax protection, and a high population density, Sri Lanka continues to enjoy remarkable biodiversity.

#### ALARMING THREATS TO ENDEMIC SPECIES

13. A recent survey by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) on the country's endangered species "red list" points out some alarming statistics. Sri Lanka's biodiversity has a high proportion of endemic species among its flora and fauna: 24 percent of flowering plants, 16 percent of mammals, 84 percent of amphibians, 44 percent of fresh water fish are endemic to Sri Lanka, and new species are still being discovered. In some cases, due in part to their limited population and range, many newly classified fauna are already severely threatened. According to the report, a third of the country's vertebrate fauna and half of the evaluated flora is endangered. IUCN officials note that 21 species of endemic amphibians and 72 of the 1099 plant species evaluated are likely already extinct while 223 species of terrestrial vertebrates, 157 species of selected inland invertebrates and 675 plant species evaluated are

categorized as nationally threatened.

#### PROTECTION

14. The country's biodiversity has been protected by a blend of Sri Lankan culture and legislation, though much more needs to be done to protect endangered species. Currently, roughly 26 percent of land is protected, for example as national parkland or forest reserves. Sri Lanka lacks legislation like the Endangered Species Act but in some situations action is taken to protect vulnerable species. For example, the government, working through the IUCN, recently moved an entire population of snails from its degraded home valley to a nearby protected valley to improve its survival chances.

15. Fish provide over 65 percent of the country's animal protein requirement. The Ministry of Fisheries has recognized the threats to the marine ecosystem caused by resource depletion due to illegal, inappropriate, or over fishing in near-shore areas. A case study on an "ecosystem approach" to fishing is being carried out by the government in the north western coastal region to demonstrate the importance of applying environmental management while maintaining a sustainable fisheries sector.

16. Interestingly, one important reason for the country's continuing biodiversity is cultural. Many Sri Lankans are vegetarian, vastly reducing the amount of land required for animal husbandry. The country lacks a tradition of trophy hunting, and its Buddhist and Hindu religions also discourage the unnecessary taking of life. Still, in the modern era, these fortunate circumstances are not enough to protect the country's rich biodiversity.

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#### LAND USE AND SUBSISTENCE LIVING

17. The main cause of biodiversity loss is habitat destruction linked to the expansion of cropland. Since 1995, approximately 33,000 hectares of forest cover have been destroyed. Sri Lanka derives almost 20 percent of its GDP from agriculture and fisheries and over 75 percent of the population remains rural and agrarian. Slash and burn agriculture (a long-standing agriculture practice of rural farmers) increases stress on land and fuels the human/elephant conflict (to be reported septel). According to the IUCN, the government is attempting to regulate slash and burn agriculture in order to preserve biodiversity and reduce contact between humans and animals, but to little effect.

18. Unfortunately, Ministry of Environment officials (MOE) concede that it lacks adequate personnel to provide effective protection, even for the most vulnerable or best-protected areas. Prof. Sarath Kotagama of the University of Colombo noted that GPS satellites are now being used to demarcate forest boundaries to assist in preventing further encroachment. The wet zone, which includes most of the southwestern part of the island, is home to most endemic species although it has only 3 percent of forest cover compared to a total forest cover of 22 percent country-wide. It is in this region where perhaps the most vulnerable populations of endemic species are found.

#### AN OPPORTUNITY

19. With the conclusion of the 30-year civil war in May 2009, Sri Lanka - and the international community - has an unprecedented opportunity to explore the thickly forested jungle region in the North of the country, home of Sri Lanka's renowned (and threatened) leopard population. Contacts note that they "have basically no knowledge of what's there, what the micro-climates and ecosystems support, and what kinds of endemic species may be threatened." IUCN's Vimukthi Weeratunga said that he is working on a proposal to

receive funding and expertise from international donors to map the region and determine what needs immediate protection.  
(NOTE: Post will forward proposals to interested USG counterparts upon receipt. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

[¶10](#). Environmental awareness has increased significantly over the past decade with the environment included in school curricula and the media reporting frequently on environmental issues. With the country's recent graduation to a middle-income country, Sri Lanka has lost some donor support for environmental projects. Unfortunately, this comes at a critical time when many species' survival is in doubt and Sri Lanka simply cannot protect its biodiversity alone.  
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